Met Office

NEWS

Parents could be doing more to protect their children's eyes from UV

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According to the Eyecare Trust, Children's eyes are 10 times more sensitive to the sun's UV rays than their skin but, in a recent Met Office survey, most people in the UK have confessed to not knowing how damaging UV can be to eye

Almost a third of UK adults are unaware that UV radiation comes from the sun, and they aren't aware that over exposure to UV can lead to eye burn, macular degeneration or cataracts later in life.

UK unaware of health risks

Although more people are aware about the connection between UV light and skin cancer, the UK public remains largely unaware of the harmful effect UV rays can have on eyes. Although 65% of people associate the effects of UV light with skin cancer and 62% with sunburn, a third (31%) believe that eyeballs cannot get sunburnt at all, with 78% unconcerned about its effects on their eyes.

In reality, extended exposure to the sun's UV rays has been linked to eye burn and long-term damage, including cataracts, macular degeneration, and photo keratitis, which can cause temporary vision loss. Just half of people (50%) are aware that eye damage caused by UV rays can be irreversible. Worryingly, just 43% of UK adults say they have sunglasses that offer UV protection.

Parents urged to protect children

Although everyone is at risk, children's eyes do not fully develop and provide natural lens protection until the age of 12 and they are likely to spend much more time outside during school holidays than their parents. Despite this, only 30% of parents said they worry about their children having too much exposure to UV and how it could lead to long term damage – pointing to a serious knowledge deficit in the UK.

Given the lack of awareness of the dangers of UV, it's unsurprising that nearly three-quarters of parents (72%) admit to not taking any action to protect their child's eyes from harmful UV rays. Only a third (32%) said they prioritise packing sunglasses when going on a day out with their children, with a further third having no idea if their children's sunglasses offered UV protection. Four in ten (40%) said they don't check UV levels before going outside, with three quarters (74%) believing there is no way to do this.

The Met Office – official provider of the UK's hourly UV forecasts – has partnered with Boots Opticians to raise awareness of the dangers of UV eyes and the need for eye protection, particularly among children.

Clare Nasir, Met Office meteorologist, said: “As a meteorologist and a mum, I’m acutely aware of the damaging effects of UV. Levels of UV have been high for many weeks but it's concerning to find out that many parents don’t realise how harmful UV can be to their child’s eyes. Protecting against skin cancer is also something that parents leave to chance, so why should eyes be different? This can be avoided by checking our hourly UV forecast on our app.”

Paul McMahon, Clinical Governance Optometrist at Boots Opticians, said: “It’s really important for children of all ages to protect their eyes from UV light. I recommend that they wear UV-blocking sunglasses whenever they are outdoors during the day - the tint doesn’t need to be dark. This is true even on cloudy and overcast days, as UV rays can penetrate cloud cover. By investing in quality sunglasses for your children, you are helping them to avoid the damaging effects of UV light. Look for sunglasses which block 100 per cent of the sun’s UV rays and enlist the help of your opticians to select the best-fitting frames.”

NHS choices provides the following advice:

- Never look at the sun directly, doing so can cause irreversible damage to your eyesight and can even lead to blindness.
- Wearing a wide-brimmed hat or sunglasses can help protect your eyes from UV rays.
- The College of Optometrists recommends buying good-quality dark sunglasses – these needn't be expensive.
- Look for glasses carrying the CE mark or the British Standard BS EN ISO 12312-1:2013, which ensures they offer a safe level of ultraviolet protection.

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